

Study on the Development Status and Prospects of Public History in Contemporary China

Huiling Feng^{1,a,*}

¹*EBUS Academy, 187 Victoria St, VANDERHOOF BRITISH COLUMBIA V0J 3A0, Canada
a. huiling20060606haha@gmail.com*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Public history is a combination of traditional historiography popularization, in which many topics related to social practice may arise. Public history is beneficial for improving the knowledge level of the general public. The United States was the first to begin the study of public history, and then public history was introduced to China. The development of Chinese public history is reflected in various film and television historiography, and has been integrated into the daily lives of the general public. The development of contemporary Chinese public history is also reflected in museum historical architecture and folk genealogy. The main reason for the rise of Chinese historiography is that the general public has increasingly high demands for spiritual nourishment, and there are more and more educated people. Public history has gained a lot of attention in this environment. The dissemination of works that combine many historical themes has aroused strong interest among the public. After two launches of public history in China, public history experienced an outbreak in the second round. The government and the public paid more attention to topics related to public history, which made the development of public history more prosperous.

Keywords: Public History, Historical Theory, Historical Crisis

1. Introduction

The theme of this project research is centered on the public historiography as a research exploration. Public historiography is a new concept that has recently been introduced. There are three schools of historiography, including academic history, public history, and popular history. Public history emphasizes the connectivity with the general public and the need for impartiality and truthfulness in history, which is more advantageous than academic history because it is more involved in people's lives. Historiography is fundamentally concerned with the good of mankind. The complete historiographical activity surrounding a historical event can be broken down into five parts: recording, analyzing, writing, disseminating, and accepting. It was in the United States that the concept of public historiography, was first proposed. They proposed that understanding lessons should not only be in the classroom, but in all aspects of life, where we can all be exposed to history-related knowledge, which can then be disseminated in a variety of ways in our lives as well [1].

The research method of public history is that people no longer use difficult language to express history, but try to integrate historical knowledge into the daily lives of the general public, and promote it to the public through digital media or film and television works. After the introduction of public history to China, it has also undergone localization changes. There have been two launches in public

history in China. Around the 1980s, both American and Chinese historiography faced a crisis in historiography. The emergence of this crisis stems from the excessive specialization of historical research. Due to various reasons, the first launch of Chinese public history was unsuccessful. After entering the 21st century, Chinese public history underwent a second launch and developed towards a more prosperous direction. Various historical themes have entered people's vision in a very popular way. Relevant departments have also launched works related to history, such as the "Three Kingdoms" program launched by CCTV's "Baijia Lectures".

2. The Process of Public History

2.1. The Process and Dissemination of Public History in the United States

The emergence of public history in the United States is fortuitous traditional history graduate students after completing their studies, unable to find a suitable faculty position in the university, and so are forced to change careers resulting in a great waste of talent employment is hopeless, and the limited number of faculty positions in the history department of many schools of the history of the research program facing closure of the dilemma. One of the founders of the history department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, teaching public history, Robert Kelly recalled how he and his colleague Wesley Johnson once discussed the hope of finding a new channel to expand the employment of graduate students in history history department's graduate program can continue to remain viable, not because of the market factors and the university cut or even withdrawn. They believe that the retention of graduate programs will be the Department of History continues to be a place of intellectual vitality, public history, that is, they put forward the plan, a three-year fund, at the University of California began the cause of public history graduate program, a total of nine people public real professional courses, including two senior seminar, focusing on the ability of the students to engage in public internships and interdisciplinary research methods of training.

According to Kelly's summary of the professor's discussions with students about the professional conduct of public historians, they also invited a number of historians who had worked in the public sphere to share their experiences with the students, who took a number of non-traditional graduate courses in history The program's initial two cohorts of students, upon graduation, mostly found jobs that matched the program's goals for their training. Through this experimental program Kelly and Johnson developed a new approach to training graduate students in public actuality and a clearer definition of its concepts. And in the inaugural issue of *The Public Historian* in 1978, the concept of public community was used and defined. In the simplest terms, public historiography refers to the combination of the expertise of historians with the methods of government departments, private enterprise, the media, local historical societies, and museum historiography [2].

Monuments not only record public memory, but also carry the public's claim to history this leads to the public's interest in history also brings uncertainty in public memory. Public historians often cannot only consider their own position, as traditional historians do, but also consider the surrounding environment or whether it is acceptable to the public. This is also the reason why they are questioned in the professional historians' community whether they can maintain the neutral and objective position of historians. In addition to memorials museums also play a very crucial role in spreading public memory. Americans have a high level of trust in museums and they feel that museums are more connected to the past. Museums play a much more important role in disseminating and storing public memory. Public historians and traditional historians serve different populations. In contrast to traditional historians, public historians have to deal not only with academics but also with different groups in the public sphere, and therefore public historians can be seen active in various fields.

2.2. Reasons and background of the rise of public history in China

Film and television historiography is mainly engaged in the creation of works with history as the content of a variety of subjects, such as popular books historical novels and film and television dramas. Applied history emphasizes the practicality of history and the irreplaceable role of history in various fields. The People's School of History focuses more on the relevance of history to the general public, as well as the participation of the general public. In the 1980s and 1990s, American public history did not attract the attention of Chinese academics. It is only since the 21st century that this movement has really attracted the attention of Chinese academics. Public history emphasizes the concept of public history and the construction of historical consciousness. In terms of writing, public historiography emphasizes the narration and writing of people's everyday language, blurring the boundaries between professional and non-professional historiography. There are two reasons for the rise of public historiography in China: firstly, the difficulty of employment for history majors has led to a change in the mode of training history professionals. Secondly, the post-modernist ideology has dissolved the authority of professional historians, thus bringing about a paradigm revolution in historiography.

There have been a total of two launches of public historiography in China, the first of which ended in failure, and the second official launch was in 2006. In that year many novel official programs on historical topics as well as literary works appeared. Entering the 21st century, public historiography has entered into academic and cultural interpretation. The continued development of public history in China has improved the application and dissemination of historical knowledge. Television lectures on history, represented by the "Hundred Schools of Lecture Theatre," have produced a number of fine works, followed by the development of audio and video lectures on history. This has led to more and more historians devoting themselves to the practice of history telling. Popular books on various historical subjects have been popular and well received by the general public [3]. After the first golden decade from 1999 to 2009, video historiography has shown a vigorous development. With the help of various information technologies, video materials have been increasingly emphasized and applied to various researches. One of the most important external reasons why the launch of the second public historiography in China can flourish is the strong market demand. During the thirty years of rapid development, the demand for cultural and spiritual life became higher because of the increase of students and urban population. Besides, with the rapid development of information technology, it resulted in a variety of different types of historical works that could be presented to the public. Thirdly, the development of contemporary public history in China cannot be separated from the advocacy and support of the Chinese government. Lastly, the rise of private forces and various historians who are not from scientific classes have made outstanding contributions to the development of contemporary Chinese public historiography.

3. Public History in Contemporary China

3.1. Imaging, Communication and Contemporary Chinese Public History Learning

Since the United States introduced the concept of "public history" to China, China has been deeply influenced by it and has conducted in-depth exploration of its system. This exploration process can be divided into four stages, and eventually popular historiography replaced popular history, and according to the model of public historiography, China has built a unique public historiography system. On the basis of the Western system, China has created a disciplinary system of public history with distinctive Chinese characteristics. For example, the role of genealogy has become more and more important in modern society, not only as an aid to modern people in understanding past historical events, but also as a powerful corroboration of historical authenticity. In the process,

genealogy has also gradually transformed from an official record of the ancient government to a spontaneous and independent way of record keeping among the people. The existence of genealogy enables people to feel history more authentically and strengthens their ties with past history and ancestors.

The main difference between film and television historiography and traditional historiography is its accessibility. It makes people understand history in a more witty, humorous and entertaining form, which makes the learning process less boring. In a subtle way, people learn history through film and television historiography. The scope of film and television historiography is wide, including TVdramas, movies, audiobook adaptations and other forms. In daily life, all these forms of entertainment are spreading history. Of course, there may be adaptations of history in the process, but this is where the possibility of independent creation of film and television historiography lies. Compared with traditional historiography, film and television historiography is no longer limited to textbook learning, and the information it disseminates may be more understandable, but it may also contain errors. It popularizes history for the public while stimulating their interest in history. In addition, by making films of traditional history for publicity, people can have a more intuitive understanding of the state and reaction of historical events when they happened.

In recent decades, the idea of history as it is received by the general public has changed dramatically. From television to popular history books, we are actually engaging with the past in a fashionable way. History is becoming popular and integrated into the culture, but professional historians have never ceased to criticize public history. Professional history insists that history is not a commodity and should not be subject to the whims of the capital market, while public history strives to make history accessible to the public in a popularized way. Using movies to teach history is a very serious matter. Because many movies that focus on historical drama are commercial in nature, they require extra attention from teachers. They must think about what their students are learning from the movie and how they can guide them through the details to a deeper understanding of history. History film has several key features in teaching and learning. First, it helps students to form conceptions of knowledge and improve their analytical comprehension; second, it stimulates latent thinking and makes history visual; and finally, history films provide controversial material that enables students to interpret past knowledge through primary and secondary data. However, the biggest challenge in using movies for teaching is to screen history movies for students. In addition, teaching with film requires ensuring that the films have historical integrity and a certain level of professionalism. This is to ensure that students can truly benefit from watching the movie and enhance their understanding and knowledge of history [4].

3.2. The Development of Public History in Contemporary China

In recent years, Chinese society has witnessed a boom in popular historiography. Topics such as "The Three Kingdoms" and "The Ming Dynasty" have become the focus of much discussion after tea. In major bookstores, there is a wide range of historical works, and their popularity and wide reading have once again boosted the prosperity of popular historiography. The popularization of the Internet has spread the boom even farther, and the sales and readership of books both online and offline have reached astonishing figures. However, in stark contrast to the popularity of popular historiography, historical

works written by professional historians are seldom favored by the general public. With the development of society and economy, the employment of history graduates is also facing increasing challenges. Despite the growing interest of the whole society in history, graduates majoring in history often face the predicament of narrow employment fields and unappreciated works. In the face of this situation, some scholars have begun to draw on the experience of the development of public history in the United States and try and practice it in China. Some scholars point out that since the 20th

century, China has experienced three historical popularization booms. The first was during the Republican period, when the rise of new historiography and vernacular historiography gave birth to a large number of popular historiography readings; the second was after the founding of the People's Republic of China and before the Cultural Revolution, when historians actively prepared pamphlets to popularize history; and the third was since the 21st century, when the dissemination of historical knowledge has become more widespread and more comprehensive to the audience with the rise of emerging media such as the network, satellite television, and the Internet. However, at the same time, the negative effects it has produced cannot be ignored [5].

After World War II, despite the economic crisis, the general trend of improving people's standard of living did not change, which led to a growing demand for the spiritual dimension. Against the background of such a historical boom, the emergence of public historians was inevitable. Due to the uneven level of authors, the quality of works on the market is inevitably mixed. Some authors, in order to attract readers, play the gimmick of truthfulness, but make up nonsense about the content and make arbitrary

evaluation of historical figures, disregarding the truthfulness and objectivity of history. This phenomenon has even reached a sensationalized level for the secret history of the harem of ancient emperors, seriously misleading the public's correct view of history. As people's standard of living continued to rise, their pursuit of spiritual culture also increased, which contributed to the rise of public historiography. People constantly make up histories that are important to them using a wide range of sources and methods, often without the help of professional historians. This is what public history is all about, beyond effect and engagement [6]. Public historiography can be a movement, a methodology, which promotes cooperation and communication in the field of history, enables more graduates of history-related majors to find employment opportunities, and provides more history-related jobs for society. It is undeniable that public history did initially rise to solve the employment problem of history graduates. However, the deepest reason for its rise also lies in the revival of modern historical narrativism after the 1970s. In order to gain a broader space for development, historiography has seen the emergence of branches such as microhistory and oral history. Public history, on the other hand, is the most suitable for the concept of postmodern historiography. Under its leadership, the scope of application of historiography has expanded rapidly, and historians have been able to play a role in a wider range of positions, such as advising governmental agencies and formulating relevant policies, providing professional guidance for the dissemination of history in the film and media, as well as cultivating human resources, and so on.

4. Conclusion

At present, China is still in its infancy in the construction of the discipline of public history, and the major universities have not yet formulated targeted training programs for public history talents. As public history is closely linked to the market, this has led to some people neglecting the rigor of historical works in the process of pursuing hot spots and gaining eyeballs. What's more, in order to pursue commercial interests at the expense of authenticity, some people arbitrarily screen historical materials just to earn traffic, thus misleading the public and making rumors become the so-called "facts". This kind of behavior has seriously damaged the reputation and scholarship of public history in various fields, and has cast a shadow of imprecision and unprofessionalism over its image. Therefore, there is an urgent need for public historiography to establish relevant regulations and legal pathways to ensure the integration of historiography with society for longer-term and more stable development. Against the background of the current saturated market, studying public history seems to have become less attractive, and many graduates have difficulties in finding suitable jobs.

At the same time, due to the lack of appropriate training programs in schools, the number of postgraduate students enrolled is also low, which makes public history face the dilemma of lack of talents at the beginning of its emergence. In order to change this situation, the government and schools should take active actions to provide more jobs and degrees for students interested in public history and graduated talents. Although there are similarities between public history and traditional history, traditional history is more rigorous, while public history focuses more on social practice. As a result, there is a need for mutual oversight within the peer group to maintain the rigor and authenticity of historiography. At the same time, due to the highly overlapping market demands, public and traditional historiography can complement and supplement each other to disseminate history to the public in a more concise and accurate way. Despite the current shortage of talented positions in public history, its development prospect is very broad. The special nature of public history makes it possible to combine with various industries and open up new communication channels. For example, combining with the film and television industry to disseminate history through film and television works can not only meet the learning needs of students, but also let the public come into contact with history in entertainment. Therefore, as long as public history is given more opportunities for dissemination, it can satisfy the public's desire for knowledge while presenting history in a more relaxed and interesting way.

References

- [1] Geoffrey M. White, "Introduction:: Public History and National Narrative", *Museum Anthropology* 21 (1):3-7, 1997.
- [2] LI Erling, "Construction of a Shared Platform for Historical Research: Taking Oral History as the Starting Point", *Journal of SJTU (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, vol.30, No.147, 2022:87-96.
- [3] Jiang Meng, "Two Initiations of Chinese Public Historiography and Their Prospects", *Studies in Historical Theory*, No. 5, 2023, 72-83.
- [4] QianMaowei, "The Chinese Identity of Chinese Public History", *Journal of Liaoning University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, Vol.43, No.4, Jul.2015, 15-22
- [5] Wang Record, Zhang Jiaxin, "Public Historiography in China_Development Path and Theoretical Construction", *Journal of Henan Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, Vol.44, No. 4, 2017, 122-128.
- [6] Halstead, Huw. "Everyday Public History - Halstead - 2022." *Wiley Online Library*, 7 Feb. 2022, onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1468-229X.13260. Accessed 26 Mar. 2024.